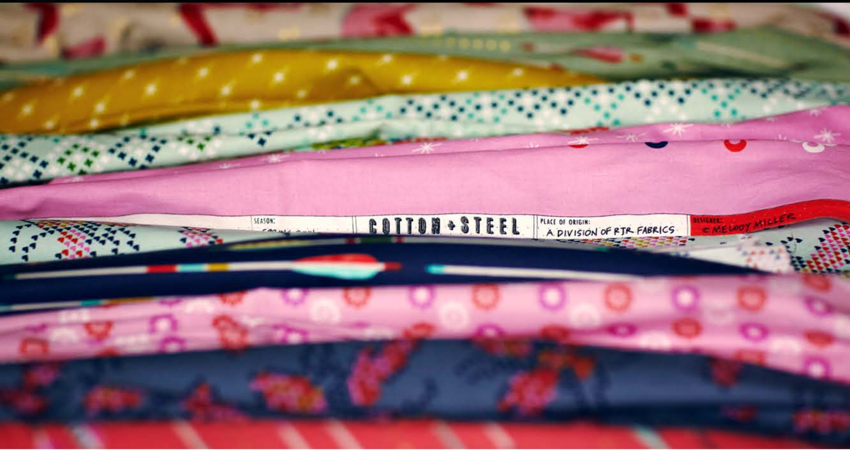


The Ties That Bind

Five Badass Women of the Cloth Stitch Together New Success in an Old Tradition

Story by Dana Hazels Seith • Photography by Gregory Miller

I recently made the trek from my home in Atlanta to my mother’s house in Kansas. I did it for a variety of reasons. For one, to be with family over a long, holiday weekend while my husband was on a commercial film shoot in Spain. Two, to help my twin sister go through the contents of boxes stored there that contain pieces of sculpture for an art exhibit she will stage in October. But, mostly, it was to celebrate my mom’s birthday and for my young daughter to meet her 94-year-old great-grandmother for the first time.

SHARE

For six days, my parents' loft apartment housed four generations under the same roof — my Grammy, my mother (Nana), my twin sister and me, and my daughter. It was pretty magical, all of us women together. I got to hear stories about how my grandmother dated other men when my grandfather left Oklahoma City for a spell to work for an uncle in California. It was a story I’d never heard before, but she seemed eager to share it with all of us. Grammy, I think, was surprised he actually went. So she dated several men who didn’t hold a candle to my grandfather, and some seven decades or so later, she still sounds a bit miffed at her late husband about it all.

Those stories are priceless, really — those conversations one gets to have with grandparents over hands of gin rummy and a cold cocktail (or in Grammy’s case, a Mike’s Hard Lemonade over ice that she’ll nurse all night long). Before I headed back to Atlanta, my mother brought out several massive piles of tea towels. Stacks and stacks of folded little kitchen towels, which she told my twin sister and me all about. We both stared at them in wonderment. Whose were these and where did they come from? They came from Grammy’s house; she’d found them after cleaning out her kitchen drawers.

The towels contained the handiwork of my great-grandmother, Grace. Embroidery thread hand-stitched on backing from quilting remnants, hemmed into tea towels. Unlike my own daughter, I didn’t know my great-grandmother.

All I know are these towels, and I guess if they could talk, they would say a lot about those men Grammy had picking her up at her parents house.

THE STORY INSIDE THE FABRIC

Fabrics, like nearly everything else in the South, tell stories. And Melody Miller, like me, has always been drawn to the stories she finds in the objects that pile up around our lives.

“A lot of my influences are these kind of homey and nostalgic things,” she says. “I like old farmhouses, and I go to a lot of estate sales. I love walking through these old homes here in the South and just wondering what the stories are that filled those walls.”

And few objects in Southern homes tell bigger stories than the quilts — scraps of fabric stitched together with batting to create what one might call a blanket of memories.

Quilting is hardly a dying art. In fact, according to Karey Bresenhan, president of Quilts Inc., which produces trade shows for the quilting industry, quilting is now a $3.5 billion industry. In today's age of economic uncertainty there are no safe bets, and it'd probably be a stretch to call quilting recession-proof, but it seems that even when there is a downturn in the economy, people pull out fabric and try to stitch something together. Clothing for their kids, at least, or new curtains to freshen up the living room.

Most sewers of today recall being taught by a grandmother, aunt, or mother, women not unlike my Grammy or great-grandma Grace. These projects – no matter if it's a quilt or a dress for a toddler – they tell stories. Items made by hand take on their own narrative as they are stitched together. In quilting, there's a rule: Measure twice and cut once. Melody Miller took that to heart and applied it to her professional life.

With four other women, Miller founded Cotton + Steel — a company whose self-proclaimed aim is to "honor the traditions of creativity, resourcefulness, and innovation inherent in the sewing and quilting world." Its first line of fabric designs are coming out this summer.

But this is no small venture in the "mommy economy." No, Cotton + Steel is coming out of the gate having already cut a deal with RJR Fabrics, the California-based company that is one of the world's top producers of fabrics for quilting and home sewing. And it's not just a deal for a one-off collection of fabrics.

Miller refers to she and her partners as a "married band of misfits." But somehow "misfits" seems too small a word to describe five Southern women who convinced RJR, an industry giant, to let them build an entire new division of the company according to their own particular vision.

A better word to describe the women of Cotton + Steel might be this: badasses.

The ladies of Cotton + Steel: pictured above, left to right: (top) Melody Miller, Rashida Coleman-Hale, Alexia Abegg (bottom) Sarah Watts & Kim Kight

BIG-BUSINESS QUILTING

This is the story of how Austin's Kim Kight, Nashville's Alexia Abegg, and Atlanta's Rashida Coleman-Hale, Sarah Watts, and Melody Miller are working under the umbrella of a giant company to shake up a very traditional industry — and to create something beautiful with their lives.

Miller is creative director and founding designer of Cotton + Steel, and her story is not unique among creative types, except that her risk is now beginning to yield financial reward.

For most, a career in the arts generally means a piecemeal of freelance projects, perhaps a part-time corporate job, in the hope that eventually it'll all pay off. Hours are spent dreaming that the side project will one day become the full-time gig, that the gamble will work, making the endless hours worth it. Cotton + Steel's gamble is already paying off.

How these women came into the business of quilting and fabric making is somewhat serendipitous. Sewing skipped a generation in Miller's family. The craft was lost on her mother, and Miller was raised in the 1980s, in the age of shopping malls and ready-to-wear pieces. Her grandmother worked at a Singer sewing machine factory and was the one who taught her how to sew. She grew up in the heart of the Lowcountry, in Beaufort, S.C., and like all the women of Cotton + Steel, she was drawn to the arts, and majored in the arts at Furman University in Greenville.

Afterward, she studied industrial design at Pratt Institute in New York, but quit the program early when she realized she didn't want to pursue industrial design as a career, although drawing objects (her favorite part of the ID curriculum) plays a role in her work to this day. Her career has had many twists and turns, including writing a book on creative ways to wrap gifts. She is the heart, head, soul, and mother of Cotton + Steel.

Atlantan Rashida Coleman-Hale learned to sew — under protest — from her mother, whose father was a tailor. Sewing wasn't the cool thing, but when Coleman-Hale became a new mom with a very good, sleeping baby, she became a bit bored. She found creative outlets in blogging and in quilting. The art of quilting tapped into her methodical nature; she likes projects with a beginning, middle and an end. While she grew up in Winter Haven, Fla., she summered on the other side of the world in Tokyo, and Japanese influences play a strong role in her designs today. After studying design at the Fashion Institute of Technology in New York, she wrote several books on sewing. Today, she's slightly introverted, but pushing herself beyond that box by leading the marketing and communications side of Cotton + Steel.

Austinite Kim Kight is the eldest of the Cotton + Steel women. All of the women in Kim's family sewed, but it was the legendary quilting women of Gee's Bend, Ala., whose work really inspired her to enter the business. The Gee's Bend quilts, created in an isolated area of southwest Alabama, have been exhibited in museums throughout the country, including the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York, and critics everywhere have lauded them.

Alexia Abegg was raised with a mother who sewed and designed everything from wedding dresses to costumes for TV shows shot in Nashville. The dining room table was her mother's work station and by high school, Alexia began sewing. She took to it quickly.

"You take something that was nothing and get something to show for your time," she says. Alexia gives off the vibe of a really smart, ahead-of-the-curve older sister. Everything she says is thoughtful and intelligent, balanced with just the right amount of dreamy, head-in-the-clouds artspeak.

Conversely, the youngest of the Cotton + Steel women, Sarah Watts, reminds everyone she meets of a witty little sister. She's wildly funny, full of great one-liners, smart as hell, and says she always had a black ballpoint pen and paper at hand growing up, so illustration became second nature. Born in Kennesaw, Ga., where she lived until age 10, she moved with her family to Florida and stayed after high school to attend college. After earning a BFA in illustration from Ringling College of Art and Design in Sarasota, she got a job designing art for children's clothing at Carter's, the apparel company based in Atlanta. She's been in the ATL ever since.

Sitting with the Cotton + Steel partners in Atlanta for an interview, the five women appear to be a group of best friends working together. Their conversations seamlessly travel from dishing a television show or a funny text exchange to designs for their fall 2014 collection.

"The one thing that all of these best friends have in common is that we all really, really love to work," Abegg says.

Coleman-Hale builds on her colleague's thought. "It's not just working," she says. "It's what we're doing. It's exciting, and being able to do that with like-minded people is so fantastic. I never thought that I'd be able to find that, and I found that with them."

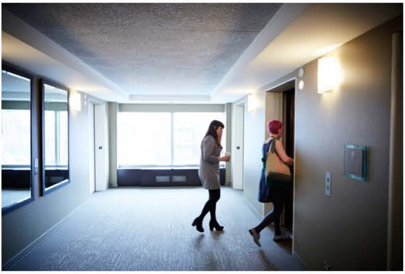
THE BIG PITCH

Rick Cohan, who founded RJR Fabrics with his father and brother in 1978, is just about as traditional as it comes. When he says he still relies heavily on handshake deals, you believe him. He explains that in his earlier days in the textile business, you shook a hand or gave your word, and that was enough. He appears to have lived up to all his contracts, verbal and otherwise. How else to explain his family's longevity in the business? Next year will mark the 100th anniversary of the first Cohan entry into the fabric business.

How do the dots connect between Cohan and Cotton + Steel? It all started with an email from Miller, a message that had a lot riding on it. Rick tells the story in a fatherly tone, almost as if it's an anecdote about a daughter.

"She wrote me this letter that used modern words, like epic, amazing, and brand," he says. "When I want to call someone I pick up the phone. I don't call it 'reaching out.' So I got the (email) and was intrigued."

What Miller was proposing to Rick in that email wasn't just to be a guest designer at RJR. She was proposing to build a new division of his company. "What if we pitched ourselves to them as a new division?" Miller recounts. "I talked to a lot of people and tried to do a lot of research so that I was bringing them very specific numbers and answers to any questions I could imagine that they would have. I wanted to paint as clear a picture as I could of what this company would look like. I wanted to set the expectations very accurately."



In a conference room just outside of L.A., in RJR's Torrance headquarters, Miller gave the half-hour pitch of her lifetime to 12 RJR executives. After the meeting Rick consulted with his partner John Durnell and called her back in.

"He just agreed to the entire plan without making corrections or changes or alterations," Miller says. "He just said yes." Thus was born Cotton + Steel, with each of its five women holding an equal stake and Miller leading the creative charge.

Such collaboration can be a slippery slope for artists. On one hand, you're working with people who can push you to make your work better than it would be without them around. On the other, you might wind up hating their guts.

Not here.

RICK COHAN OF RJR FABRICS WITH THE PARTNERS OF COTTON + STEEL.

GIVE RESPECT > TO GET < RESPECT

Spending time with these women, sibling metaphors immediately spring to mind. Miller is the wise older sister, and Watts is the rascally youngest with talent far beyond her years. All five banter, support each other, crack each other up, tease, cry, boost each other's confidence and are, essentially, family. Their tendency toward collaboration extends to their relationship with RJR.

"We both helped each other do a bigger thing," Miller says.

Each of the women pushes each other to be better, and they do better work as a result. They hold each other accountable for the work. Each of the Cotton + Steel women brings something different to the table. They offer each other support and critiques throughout the design process.

"We all kind of have to impress each other all the time," Watts says.

Their pushing is paying off. It's already been noted by those who cover the industry and know the players far better than I that the debut of Cotton + Steel's first collection in May 2014 at the International Quilt Market in Pittsburgh will most likely go down as a turning point in the industry.

When Cotton + Steel became a reality, Melody had four somewhat loose goals for the company, all of which she thought would take at least five years to meet. The first was to have all of the women in the company earn a salary that felt like an equivalent to what they could make in any other creative field. Second, she believed that Cotton + Steel's "substrate" fabrics (a category beyond normal quilting cottons), would be essential to their success, give them a dependable niche in the market and help establish their credibility within the industry.Third, Miller wanted to have the ability to do some world travel as a group to help grow the Cotton + Steel brand internationally. And lastly, she wanted to bridge the industry gap between modern quilters like herself and the more tradition-bound vendors of quilting supplies.

At the rate Cotton + Steel is going, Miller predicts the ability to pay each of the designers a comfortable salary within the first fiscal year. The savvy business relationships Miller has built tackled her second goal. Tapping into her own ingenuity, Melody realized early on in her presentation to Rick that in order for them to offer something really different to the marketplace, they needed to get beyond selling quilting cottons, as every other company does. She added a new category, substrates, and banked on them being a 20 percent part of Cotton + Steel's sales. Right now, they are more than halfway there in just a very short time, partly due to Craftsy.com, an online store which offers classes in crafting with Cotton + Steel fabrics as part of their quilting and sewing kits.

SPRING 2014
SEASON:
COLLECTION NAME
MADE IN JAPAN
DESIGNER
@Alexa
fabrics

As for traveling the globe, the women of Cotton + Steel have been asked by their Australian distributor to travel there in November, and they are in talks with a European agent who showed interest in bringing them to Finland.

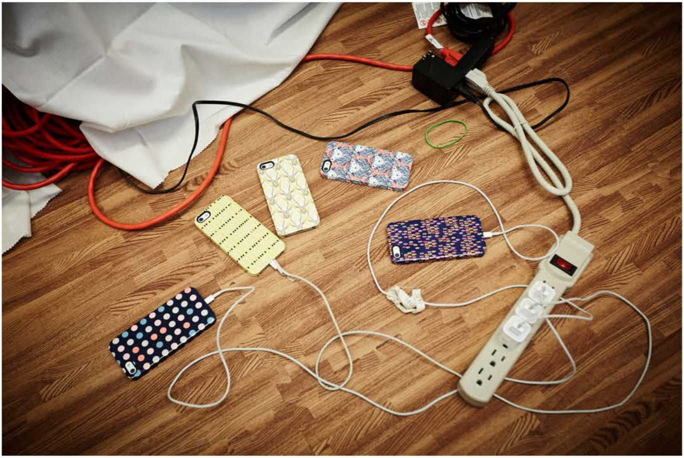
As for Miller's last goal — bridging the gap between traditional and modern quilters — it's happening.

"One of the shops that was very hesitant to purchase the collection put the goods in their online shop as a pre-sale (the goods won't be in the shop until mid-July) and reached over $1,200 worth of sales in the first two hours the fabric was online," she says. "This is more of an indication that we will be a successful product in traditional shops."

> "WHAT IS NOW MODERN BECOMES CONTEMPORARY BECOMES TRADITIONAL. EVERYONE HAS MORE IN COMMON THAN YOU THINK THEY DO."
>
> - RICK COHAN

Miller remembers, "Rick told us early on, 'What is now modern becomes contemporary becomes traditional. Everyone has more in common than you think they do.' We wanted to bridge that gap, and maybe the traditional shops are ready to try something new. They've been so receptive."

Cohan puts it this way: “Eleanor Roosevelt was a modern lady. Jacqueline Kennedy was a modern lady. They are all modern ladies all the way up. In order to get respect, I told them (Cotton + Steel) we needed to show respect to get respect. And that’s kind of been the sub-tone of our company.”



THE MODERN SEWING CIRCLE

For today’s Pinterest fanatic, DIY crafter or home sewer, there’s a real sense of community, similar to what Grammy and the women of her generation had. It’s like a modern-day sewing circle where these women are best friends. While my great-grandmother’s club actually had a name, the Sunflower Quilting Club, which started in a church because people did not have enough room in their homes, modern quilting groups seem to operate a bit less formally, and communities build through blog posts and Pins.

DESCRIPTION:
· picnic · luminescence · Steel

Cotton + Steel's current collection features 18 pieces by each of the five designers and uses a range of RJR's already existing solids (plus a few more that Cotton + Steel added). Miller compares the burgeoning DIY movement, which is bringing new people to the arts of sewing and quilting, with the rise and decline of factory-produced white bread.

"The whole selling point with white bread is that no hands touched it," she says. "That was celebrated. Now we've come full circle. Everyone wanted manufactured, and now it's like, let's go back to the handmade thing that's actually richer and more valuable."

She adds, "Rick has regularly said to me that he has never seen anything like this in his 35 years selling fabric."

Miller concludes, "It's great to have success in business, but I feel like it doesn't count as much if you're not happy. I really want everyone to feel fulfilled in this. To me, that's a sign of our success: if everyone is feeling deeply fulfilled."

The interesting part is that the feeling of fulfillment spreads beyond Melody, Rashida, Sarah, Kim, and Alexia to Rick Cohan and his colleagues at RJR.

"It's like when you get married," Miller says. "There's a timing element, when you are both ready for the same goal. It's like we all got married. RJR has been around long enough to have massive successes and huge downturns. They've been at the top, and they saw this as an opportunity. And we were ready. We were at exactly the right point in our careers to do this."

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